



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Iceland

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2003](#)

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Iceland is a constitutional republic and a parliamentary democracy in which citizens periodically choose their representatives in free and fair multiparty elections. In May, voters reelected the Independence and Progressive Parties to form a governing coalition led by Prime Minister David Oddsson. The judiciary is independent.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control of the police forces, which were responsible for internal security. The country had no military forces. A few members of the security forces committed isolated human rights abuses.

The open economy provided residents with a high standard of living. The population was approximately 288,000; the gross domestic product for 2002 totaled \$9 billion, an annual decline of 0.5 percent. Fish and other marine products accounted for approximately 40 percent of the country's exports; aluminum was the second leading export.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, and the law and judiciary provided effective means of dealing with individual instances of abuse. There were rare instances of police mistreatment and arbitrary arrest and detention. Societal discrimination against minorities and foreigners was a problem. There were isolated reports of women trafficked to the country.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of the arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life committed by the Government or its agents.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices, and there were no reports that government officials employed them. In its May review of the country's report on its implementation of the Convention Against Torture, the U.N. Committee Against Torture expressed concern that the law does not expressly define and prohibit torture and does not prohibit the courts' use of evidence obtained through torture; however, the Government responded that its law does prohibit torture and that there were no allegations of police employing torture.

In December, the Reykjavik police department terminated an officer's employment after a court found the officer guilty of using a chemical spray weapon without due cause in the course of making an arrest in March (see Section 1.d.).

Prison conditions generally met international standards, and the Government permitted visits by independent human rights observers. The Icelandic Red Cross visited prisoners regularly, and the Ombudsman of Parliament monitored prison conditions.

Litla Hraun Prison, a state-of-the-art detention facility, held most of the country's 110 prisoners; however, the prison system also used a substandard jail (Hegningarhusid, built in 1874), where the 16 individual cells lacked toilets and sinks. In most cases, prisoners stayed in Hegningarhusid Prison only a short time for evaluation and processing before moving to another facility.

The Government maintained a separate minimum-security prison for women inmates; however, because so few women were incarcerated, some men who had been convicted of nonviolent crimes were held there as well. Judges could sentence juvenile offenders who were at least 15 years old to prison terms, but they gave the vast majority probation or suspended sentences or sent them to treatment programs. In the rare instances when juvenile offenders were incarcerated, they were held with adults, since there was no separate facility for juveniles. The Government argued that separation was not practical since the need to incarcerate a juvenile occurred infrequently; however, human rights observers criticized this practice.

The law allows the Government to hold pretrial detainees with the general prison population. In May, the Government initiated the bidding process for a new detention prison just outside of Reykjavik for completion in 2005.

In its May review, the U.N. Committee Against Torture also noted the use of solitary confinement for pre-trial detainees. The Government stated that changes to its law were unnecessary because it only authorized solitary confinement in special circumstances and in moderation. During the year, 55 of 69 persons placed in custody spent some time in solitary confinement, on average for 11 days. In March, the Ombudsman asked the prison authority to take steps to ensure adequate medical treatment for inmates in solitary confinement. He acted on a complaint filed by one inmate in October 2002 whose request to see a psychiatrist was denied. The Ombudsman criticized officials' carelessness, and the prison undertook to retrain staff on proper procedures for safeguarding prisoner welfare.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the Government generally observed these prohibitions.

The Minister of Justice is the head of the police force. The National Commissioner of Police administers and runs police operations that require centralized coordination among various offices. Various district chiefs of police have responsibility for law enforcement in their areas, investigate criminal offenses, and have prosecution powers.

Police may only make arrests when they strongly suspect someone has committed a crime or when someone refuses to obey police orders to move. Persons placed under arrest are entitled to legal counsel, receive a form for their signature that outlines their rights and options, and within 24 hours of the arrest appear before a judge who rules whether they need to remain in custody during the investigation.

In December, the Reykjavik district court found two Reykjavik police officers guilty of improper arrests and false reports in the cases of a 23-year-old man taken into custody on March 8 and a 30-year-old man taken into custody on March 9. The court imposed respective prison sentences of 2 and 5 months suspended; the longer term was given to an officer also found guilty of improper use of chemical spray.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the Government did not employ it.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution and the law provide for an independent judiciary, and the Government generally respected this provision in practice.

There are two levels of courts: A five-member Judicial Council, which administers the eight district courts, and the Supreme Court. The Minister of Justice appoints members of the Judicial Council and the Supreme Court; all judges, at all levels, serve for life.

The law provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. Courts do not use juries, but multi-judge panels are common, particularly in the Supreme Court, which hears all appeals. The courts presume defendants' innocence and generally try them without delay. Defendants receive access to legal counsel of their own choosing. For defendants unable to pay attorneys' fees, the State covers the cost; however,

defendants who are found guilty must reimburse the State. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial, to confront witnesses, and to participate in the proceedings. At the discretion of the courts, prosecutors may introduce evidence that police have obtained illegally. With limited exceptions, trials are public and conducted fairly. Defendants have the right to appeal, and the Supreme Court handles appeals expeditiously.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Supreme Court had violated Article 6.1 (right to an independent and impartial tribunal) of the European Convention on Human Rights in its handling of two cases. In the first, decided in April, a defendant accused a judge of partiality because the judge's husband was the guarantor for several debts on which the defendant had defaulted. In the second, decided in July, the Supreme Court had overturned a District Court acquittal and imposed a prison sentence based on a reassessment of oral evidence presented before the lower court without hearing testimony from witnesses or the accused.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Constitution prohibits such actions, and the Government generally respected these prohibitions in practice.

Scientists and privacy advocates continued to criticize the government's decision to contract construction of a national computerized medical record database to a private, for-profit company. Although the firm agreed to encrypt individuals' names, the lack of data anonymity led to concerns about the integrity of the doctor-patient relationship and commercial use of personal data. In November, the firm acknowledged that continuing opposition from doctors, and problems meeting national Data Protection Authority requirements for security certification, would likely prevent completion of a master database intended to combine the genealogical, genetic, and medical records of a majority of the population. In a further setback for the firm, the Supreme Court in December recognized a daughter's right to privacy and prohibited the transfer of her father's clinical records into the database.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, including academic freedom, and the Government generally respected these rights in practice. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to ensure freedom of speech and of the press, including academic freedom.

The independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views without government restriction.

The law bans the production, exhibition, distribution, or sale of violent motion pictures, defined as those that show mistreatment or the brutal killing of humans or animals. In addition, a six-member Motion Picture Review Committee, appointed by the Minister of Education and Culture, reviewed all motion pictures before their release and rated their suitability for children.

Internet access was available and unrestricted.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for freedom of assembly and association, and the Government generally respected these rights in practice; however, police halted a demonstration by several protesters who displayed anti-NATO signs during the public celebration of the country's national day on June 17. Police destroyed the protesters' signs and forcibly removed them from the celebration area. Although police have the right to halt a protest if they believe the protesters will incite violence, witnesses said that the protesters appeared to pose no threat to public order.

In June, the Privacy and Data Protection Authority told the Ministry of Justice that the Ministry had acted unlawfully in issuing lists of Falun Gong members to police and airlines who in turn denied entry to the country to between 110 and 120 Falun Gong practitioners in June 2002. A human rights lawyer asked the Ministry of Justice to issue an official apology to the group and threatened to take legal action if it did not do so. At the lawyer's request, the Ombudsman of Parliament undertook to review the case. The investigation continued at year's end as the Ombudsman awaited the Prime Minister's explanation of the legal basis on which the Government had barred Falun Gong members from boarding planes bound for the country. In a preliminary finding, the Ombudsman

determined that the law permits authorities to bar prospective protesters from entering the country and, alternatively, to make entry contingent on signing agreements to follow police orders. Human rights advocates complained that the Ombudsman's decision set a precedent for unfettered government action whenever the police assert that a group presents a threat to public order.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The State financially supported and promoted the official religion, Lutheranism.

The State directly paid the salaries of the 146 ministers in the State Lutheran Church, and these ministers were considered to be public servants under the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs; however, the Church was autonomous in its internal affairs. The Government did not pay Lutheran ministers in the nonstate churches, also known as Free Churches.

All citizens 16 years of age and older must pay an annual church tax of approximately \$104 (isk 7,800). For persons who were not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belonged to one that was not registered and recognized officially by the Government, the tax payment goes to the University of Iceland, a secular institution.

The law specifies conditions and procedures that religious organizations must follow to be registered by the Government. Such recognition was necessary for religious organizations other than the state church to receive a per capita share of church tax funds from the Government. The law applies only to religious organizations that are seeking to be, or are already, officially recognized and registered. The Government did not place any restrictions or requirements on unregistered religious organizations, which had the same rights as other groups in society.

The law mandates religious instruction in Christianity in the public schools; however, students may be exempted from attending the classes.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2003 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government generally respected them in practice.

Although neither the Constitution nor the law provides for the granting of refugee status or asylum to persons who meet the definition in the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol; in practice, the Government provided protection against refoulement and granted refugee status or asylum. The Government cooperated with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. In January, the Act on Foreigners took effect that provides guidelines on the granting of asylum and refugee status; the Act provides that only the Directorate of Immigration may deny admission to asylum seekers.

In 2001, the country became part of the Schengen free travel area, resulting in the elimination of formal border controls on the movement of persons into the country from the other Schengen countries.

The Government has not formulated a policy of temporary protection for those persons who fall outside of the definition of the 1951 U.N. Convention Related to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol because this issue has rarely arisen. The Directorate of Immigration and the Icelandic Red Cross (which housed and assisted asylum seekers under a government contract) reported that 80 persons had applied for asylum during the year (compared with 118 in 2002). Of these, 23 were sent to other countries, 26 withdrew their applications, and 21 were denied asylum. At year's end, the applications of seven persons still were being processed. Three persons received a 1-year residence permit for humanitarian reasons. Most asylum seekers applied for asylum after entering the country, rather than in the international sector of the airport. When border officials admit asylum seekers into the country, they must immediately turn them over to the Icelandic Red Cross and the Directorate of Immigration for processing and care. Processing of asylum cases may take 1 year or more, during which time asylum seekers were eligible for state-subsidized health care but could not work or enroll their children in public schools.

In March, the Government received 24 UNHCR-designated quota refugees originally from Serbia. The Government has no fixed refugee acceptance requirements and reevaluates the refugee situation on an annual basis, a practice

that human rights observers criticized. The Icelandic Red Cross housed the refugees and helped them to find jobs and integrate into the community. Refugees are entitled to free housing and utilities for 1 year, as well as to health care and social benefits payments. Red Cross representatives said that their new communities accepted the refugees readily.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The Constitution provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercised this right in practice through periodic, free, and fair elections held on the basis of universal suffrage. Elections to the Althingi, the unicameral legislature, were held in May.

A center-right coalition has governed since 1991. Following the May elections, there were 19 women in the 63-member Parliament and 3 women in the 12-member Cabinet. Two of nine Supreme Court members were women. Foreigners who have resided in the country legally for 5 years (3 years for Scandinavian citizens) may vote in municipal elections.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were cooperative and responsive to their views. An independent Ombudsman, elected by Parliament, monitors and reports to national and local authorities to ensure equal protection of persons residing in the country, whether citizens or aliens. Individuals may lodge complaints with the Ombudsman regarding decisions, procedures, and conduct of public officials and government agencies. The Ombudsman may demand official reports, documents, and records and may summon officials to give testimony and has access to official premises. While the Ombudsman's conclusions are not binding on authorities, his recommendations normally have been followed. There was also a Children's Ombudsman (see Section 5).

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on these factors. The population is strongly egalitarian and opposes discrimination based on any of these factors.

Women

The law prohibits domestic violence and rape, including spousal rape; however, violence against women continued to be a problem, with gang rapes an ongoing concern. Police statistics indicated that the incidence of violence against women, including rape and sexual assault, was low; however, the number of women seeking medical and counseling assistance indicated that many incidents went unreported. Each year, up to 100 women ask for temporary lodging at the country's women's shelter, mainly because of domestic violence. The shelter offered counseling to about 367 clients between January and November. The sexual violence counseling center in Reykjavik drew 496 clients during the year, including 251 seeking help for the first time, an increase of 13 percent for the second year in a row.

The Government helped finance various facilities and organizations that provided assistance to victims of violence. The City of Reykjavik, in addition to partially funding such services, provided help to immigrant women in abusive relationships, offering emergency accommodation, counseling, and information on legal rights. Courts could issue restraining orders, but there were complaints that they did so only in extreme circumstances. Victims of sexual crimes were entitled, under the Criminal Code, to lawyers to advise them of their legal rights and help them pursue cases against the alleged assailants; however, a large majority of victims declined to press charges or chose to forgo trial, in part to avoid unwanted publicity. Some local human rights monitors also attributed underreporting to the fact that convictions traditionally yield light sentences: The maximum penalty for rape is 16 years' imprisonment, but judges typically imposed sentences much closer to the minimum of 1 year.

Prostitution is not illegal, but it is illegal to engage in prostitution as a main source of income. It is also illegal to act as an intermediary in the sale or procurement of sex.

There were concerns that some foreign women may have been trafficked to work as exotic dancers (see Section 6.f.).

More than 80 percent of women participated in the labor market. In part, this reflected the country's comprehensive system of subsidized day care, which made work outside the home more affordable and convenient for parents. The law requires that employers give preference to hiring and promoting women in areas where they are underrepresented, so long as they are equal in all other respects to male job seekers. Despite laws that require equal pay for equal work, a pay gap existed between men and women. According to one of the largest labor unions, women on average earned 14 percent less than men during the year. Some women's rights activists also expressed concern that the proportion of women in parliament dropped below one-third after elections in May (see Section 3).

Since January, the law permits both mothers and fathers to take 3 months of paid leave upon the birth of a child, with an additional 3 months that parents either could take individually or split between them. Such leave is at 80 percent of the normal salary. The new leave requirements apply equally to the public and private sectors.

The Government funded a Center for Gender Equality, under the Ministry of Social Affairs, to administer the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men. The Center also provided gender equality counseling and education to national and municipal authorities, institutions, companies, individuals, and NGOs. The Minister of Social Affairs appoints a Complaints Committee on Equal Status to adjudicate alleged violations of the Act; the Committee's rulings are non-reviewable. The Minister of Social Affairs also appoints an Equal Status Council, with nine members drawn from national women's organizations, the University of Iceland, and labor and professional groups, which makes recommendations for equalizing the status of men and women in the labor market.

Children

The Government was strongly committed to children's rights and welfare; it amply funded public education and health care. School attendance is compulsory through the age of 15 and free through public university level. Approximately 85 percent of students continued to upper secondary education. The Government provided free prenatal and infant medical care, as well as heavily subsidized childcare. The Children's Ombudsman, who is appointed by the Prime Minister but is independent from the Government, fulfilled a mandate to protect children's rights, interests, and welfare by, among other things, exerting influence on legislation, government decisions, and public attitudes. When investigating complaints, the Ombudsman had access to all of the country's public and private institutions and associations that house children or otherwise care for them; however, the Ombudsman's conclusions were not legally binding on parties to disputes.

Human rights observers, including Save the Children Iceland, criticized the continuing compilation of a national health database that included children. The Government authorized the automatic inclusion of the medical records of children under the age of 18 unless their legal guardians requested otherwise. On reaching the age of 18, individuals may elect to discontinue their inclusion in the database but not to withdraw information already stored (see Section 1.f.).

In January, the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child urged the Government to increase support to families of children with disabilities and to commit resources to assisting children of immigrants and foreigners, who have high secondary school drop-out rates.

There were some reports of abuse of children, although there was no societal pattern of child abuse. The government-funded Agency for Child Protection operated eight treatment centers and a diagnostic facility for abused and troubled minors. It also coordinated the work of approximately 34 committees around the country that were responsible for managing child protection issues (for example, foster care) in their local areas. Many of the local committees did not have ready access to professionals knowledgeable about sexual abuse. One such committee became the focus of public criticism in August when a district court sentenced a man to 3 years' imprisonment for sexually abusing a child over a 4-year period. Testimony at the man's trial showed that a school nurse had reported the abuse to the local child protection committee 6 months before police and judicial authorities became aware of the problem and took action. The Agency for Child Protection undertook to investigate the committee's failure to act but, in the interest of preserving the child's privacy, declined to make its findings public.

In an effort to accelerate prosecution of child sexual abuse cases and lessen trauma to the child, the Government maintained a Children's Assessment Center (Barnahus). The Center, which handled approximately 165 child abuse cases (two-thirds of the year's total) during the year, was intended to create a safe and secure environment where child victims feel more comfortable talking about what happened to them. It brought together police, prosecutors, judges, doctors, and officials from child protection services. District Court judges, however, did not have to use the Center and may hold investigatory interviews in the courthouse instead, a practice that concerned children's rights

advocates.

Persons with Disabilities

There was no official discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, or the provision of other state services. The law provides that such persons have the right to all common national and municipal services and to receive assistance to live and work normally in society. The law also provides that persons with disabilities receive preference for a government job when they are at least as qualified as other applicants; however, advocates asserted that common practice and implementation of the law fell short of full protection of the rights of persons with disabilities to the extent that persons with disabilities have come to constitute a majority of the country's poor.

Building regulations require that public accommodations and government buildings, including elevators, be accessible to persons in wheelchairs; that public property managers reserve 1 percent of parking spaces (a minimum of one space) for persons with disabilities; and that, to the extent possible, sidewalks outside the main entrance of such buildings be kept clear of ice and snow. Violations of these regulations are punishable by a fine or a jail sentence of up to 2 years; however, the main association for persons with disabilities complained that this was not enforced regularly and that authorities rarely assessed penalties for noncompliance.

Parliament in 2001 ordered an increase in the minimum payment to persons with disabilities who have able-bodied spouses but continued to subject benefits to a modified means test. The Association of Disabled Persons challenged the law, and in October, the Supreme Court ruled that means-tested benefits are permissible but that the Government owed back-benefits to claimants unconstitutionally disadvantaged by the Government's withholding of some payments in 1999-2000. In December, the Government paid compensation to these claimants.

Some mental health advocates criticized the Government for not devoting sufficient attention and resources to the care of persons with mental disabilities. Although the law safeguards their rights, a large number of persons with mental disabilities remained on waiting lists for housing and employment programs. Advocates for the mentally ill alleged that the government-financed health system funded too few hospital places for acute patients and thus exacerbated a shortage of publicly funded preventative and follow-up mental health care.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

While the population remained largely homogeneous, family- and employment-sponsored immigrants were more visible. At the end of 2002, there were 10,200 foreign residents (3.5 percent of the population). Many temporary workers came from Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, and the Directorate of Immigration expected most to seek to remain permanently rather than return to their countries of origin.

The term *nýbúar*--newcomer--has taken on a negative connotation and was increasingly applied to immigrants of color. Asian women in public at night reportedly were taunted on the assumption that they were prostitutes, minority children were teased for allegedly having been purchased on the Internet, and citizens with foreign-born spouses reported receiving anonymous threats.

The Icelandic Red Cross operated an Intercultural Center in Reykjavik to help foreigners adjust to living in the country. The Center offered free translation, education, research, and advice services. The Ministry of Social Affairs operated a Multicultural Center in Isafjordur that facilitated the interaction of citizens with foreign nationals and provided support services for foreign nationals in rural municipalities.

In a July report, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance concluded that conditions for immigrants "may not be wholly satisfactory" and recommended that the Government research the extent of societal racism and discrimination and introduce or fine-tune relevant legislation. It pointed specifically to incidents involving denial to minorities of access to public places such as discotheques and treatment of persons of immigrant origin as an economic resource rather than as full members of society.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The Constitution provides for the right of workers to establish unions, draw up their own constitutions and rules, choose their own leaders and policies, and publicize their views; and workers exercised these rights. Labor unions

were independent of the Government and political parties. Approximately 85 percent of all eligible workers belonged to unions.

Labor courts effectively adjudicated disputes over contracts and over the rights provided by the law, which prohibits antiunion discrimination. By law, employers found guilty of anti-union discrimination must reinstate workers fired for union activities; however, in practice the charges often were difficult to prove.

The law permits unions to affiliate internationally, and they took active part in Nordic, European, and other international trade union bodies.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Neither law nor practice impedes union membership. The law requires employers to withhold union dues (1 percent of gross pay) from the pay of all employees, whether or not they are union members, to help support disability, strike, and pension funds, and other benefits to which all workers are entitled.

Trade unions and management organizations periodically negotiate collective bargaining agreements that set specific terms for workers' pay, hours, and other conditions. These agreements, not the law, set the minimum labor standards for most workers. Unions renegotiated expiring collective bargaining agreements during the year, with others scheduled for renewal in 2004. The Government played a minor role in the bargaining process, providing mediation assistance in a few cases (through the State Mediator's Office).

In March, the International Labor Organization (ILO) decided in favor of the Icelandic Federation of Labor (IFL) in the case of a 2001 fish industry strike; the ILO ruled that the Government had infringed the principle of free and voluntary collective bargaining and requested that the Government change collective bargaining procedures to avoid future legislative interventions.

With the exception of limited categories of workers in the public sector whose services are essential to public health or safety, unions have the right to strike. There were no strikes during the year.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Bonded Labor

The law prohibits forced or bonded labor, including by children, and there were no reports that such practices occurred.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits the employment of children younger than age 16 in factories, on ships, or in other places that are hazardous or require hard labor; this prohibition was observed in practice. Children 14 or 15 years old may be employed part-time or during school vacations in light, nonhazardous occupations. Their work hours must not exceed the ordinary work hours of adults in the same occupation. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration enforced child labor regulations effectively.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law does not mandate a minimum wage, but the minimum wages negotiated in various collective bargaining agreements applied automatically to all employees in those occupations, whether they were union members or not. Labor contracts provided a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The standard legal workweek was 40 hours, which included nearly 3 hours of paid breaks a week. Work exceeding 8 hours in a workday must be compensated as overtime. Workers were entitled to 11 hours of rest within each 24-hour period and to a day off every week. Under defined special circumstances, employers may reduce the 11-hour rest period to no less than 8 hours, but they then must compensate workers with 1.5 hours of rest for every hour of reduction. They may also postpone a worker's day off by 1 week.

Parliament set health and safety standards, and the Ministry of Social Affairs administered and enforced them through its Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which could close down workplaces until they met safety and health standards. Workers had a collective, not an individual, right to refuse to work in a place that did

not meet occupational safety and health criteria. Firing workers who report unsafe or unhealthy conditions was illegal.

Union representatives and media reported that Italian contractor Impregilo failed to pay adequate wages to its foreign workers on a major government-financed hydroelectric dam construction project. The company hired workers through Portuguese employment agencies that created multiple versions of contracts to mislead both employees and regulators. Living conditions for foreign workers were poor, and the local government lacked resources to monitor the contractor's adherence to health and safety regulations. The Government threatened to stop issuing work permits for Impregilo to bring in foreign workers if it did not improve conditions at the site, and the company gradually complied. In September, Impregilo allegedly fired a Romanian worker for refusing to sign a counterfeit contract. The Directorate of Labor assisted the worker in obtaining alternative employment and a new work permit and began strict monitoring of Impregilo to ensure that it paid wages at the official rate.

f. Trafficking in Persons

A law that entered into force March 10 prohibits trafficking in persons; however, there were anecdotal reports that women were trafficked for exploitation.

The March amendment to the general penal code states that "whoever is found guilty of trafficking in persons with the aim of sexual abuse, or forced labor, or for organ removal shall be punished by up to eight years imprisonment." Criminal procedures provide that victims may testify against traffickers at government expense. No person has yet been charged with trafficking in persons, although traffickers have been convicted under the law on alien smuggling.

The law provides that a person may be extradited as long as the offense involved would be punishable by more than 1 year's imprisonment; therefore, the law would allow the extradition of persons who were charged with trafficking in other countries.

Police, airport authorities, and women's aid groups reported that there was anecdotal evidence of women trafficked to the country primarily in connection with foreign women who entered the country to work in striptease clubs. The Baltics were the main countries of origin for these dancers, with others coming from Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. There were no statistics on the number or origin of women actually trafficked. While most attention has been focused on the country as a possible destination point for trafficked women, some cases during the year indicated that the country was also being used as a transit point for the movement of trafficked women between Europe and North America. There were no reliable estimates on how many women may have been involved.

To work as an exotic dancer, any foreigner from outside the European Economic Area must first obtain a work permit, which is typically valid for 3 months. In 2002, the number of foreign dancers applying for work permits plummeted following a ban by Reykjavik authorities on private dances that served as a front for prostitution. The Supreme Court upheld the ban in February, and other municipalities have since enacted their own bans, thus largely destroying the profit incentive for trafficking women into the country.

Victims of trafficking could seek help at the women's shelter, counseling center, and hospital, all of which were government funded. There were no domestic NGOs dedicated solely to assisting victims of trafficking, nor was there an established government assistance program. Some NGOs provided government-supported counseling and shelter to women and children who were victims of violence or sexual abuse. The government-funded Icelandic Human Rights Center was also available to assist with trafficking cases and make referrals (see Section 5).

The Ministries of Justice and Social Affairs hosted a conference on trafficking in persons in February as part of a joint Nordic-Baltic campaign against trafficking. Following the conference and associated press attention, the Minister of Social Affairs formed an advisory committee to coordinate government action to combat violence against women.